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TAGS: PREL PBTS PHSA EWWT MOPS RS GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: RISKY SITUATION IN THE BLACK SEA

REF: A. TBILISI 1949

1B. TBILISI 1665

1C. TBILISI 1729

1D. STATE 94922

1E. TBILISI 1643

1F. MOSCOW 2360

1G. TBILISI 1627

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Bass for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Georgian officials confirm that they are neither interdicting vessels outside their territorial waters nor patrolling the waters north of the Enguri River in the Black Sea, and they continue to seek a way forward on shipping with Turkey. There have been no additional maritime incidents on the Black Sea involving the Georgian government since we raised concerns in August. One ongoing concern is the threat of smuggling in the Black Sea -- a high-threat region for WMD transshipment. Another is a provocation from the Russian or Abkhaz sides; the Russians and Abkhaz have not committed to avoiding provocations, and Russia seems intent on increasing its naval presence in Abkhazia, despite its cease-fire commitments. This is evidenced by Russia's interest in purchasing a Mistral amphibious assault ship from France (septel). By staking a claim to Abkhaz "territorial" waters but not defining them, the Russians and Abkhaz have created a gray area that has already caused an incident. On November 10, Russian forces detained five Georgian fishermen in the Black Sea near the Abkhaz administrative boundary, who were fined and released. The Russian presence ensures continuing tension and possibility of escalation, as well as a weakened border control regime. End summary.

12. (C) Comment: The Georgian side has acknowledged the international community's concerns about their actions in August and September and the potential for escalation, including those expressed by the United States (refs C-E) and has taken steps to prevent future incidents. The other parties inside Georgia -- the Russians and Abkhaz -- have not acknowledged the same danger and committed to taking comparable steps on their part. Although Russian officials report they have urged restraint by the Abkhaz(ref F), Russian forces are patrolling these waters. The undefined claim to Abkhaz "territorial" waters, and initial efforts to enforce that claim, in fact suggest they have taken a more aggressive stance toward enforcing their view of the political situation. Furthermore, the ambiguous situation widens the gap in Georgia's overall border protection regime, increasing the threat of destabilization in the Black Sea from nuclear, arms or other smuggling. As noted in ref G, the tension ultimately stems from the ongoing Russian presence in Georgia. Engaging all sides on any destabilizing actions, be they detentions and seizures or military build up, is the way to ensure stability in the Black Sea. End comment.

GEORGIAN COAST GUARD AVOIDING PROVOCATION, SEEKING WAY FORWARD

¶3. (C) An Embassy officer recently met with the Head of Coast Guard Operations in Poti, who confirmed that the Georgian Coast Guard is not patrolling the waters north of the Enguri River in order to avoid any provocation with the Abkhaz or Russians. He added that, in general, they have not patrolled north of the Enguri since the early 1990s. Likewise, First Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria announced during the U.S.-Georgia Security Working Group in October that Coast Guard personnel have orders not to engage in hot pursuit and QGuard personnel have orders not to engage in hot pursuit and not to take any actions in Georgia's economic zone (i.e., beyond 24 nautical miles - see ref A). We are unaware of any Georgia-initiated incidents since August, and Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze told EUR DAS Tina Kaidanow November 16 that Georgia is aware that six vessels have sailed to Abkhazia since the last Georgian seizure. He added that Georgia wants to enable trade with Abkhazia, and a Georgia-Turkey working group will meet November 19 to find a way forward that facilitates trade but does not jeopardize Georgian security or territorial integrity. Vashadze said that Turkey has already turned down one idea to address possible smuggling concerns -- basing Georgian officials in Turkish ports. He noted that U.S. encouragement may be necessary to help reach an agreement between Georgia and Turkey.

RISK OF SMUGGLING REMAINS HIGH IN BLACK SEA

¶4. (C) Stability in the Black Sea remains a serious and time-sensitive issue. The waters off Abkhazia continue to be

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"off limits" to the Georgians, and there are no mechanisms to inspect cargo entering or leaving Abkhazia. The Caucasus and Black Sea are high-threat regions for WMD transshipment, and the Coast Guard's ability to detect, interdict and investigate possible smuggling activities is severely limited without internationally accepted Georgian jurisdictional authority to inspect vessels off Abkhazia. Currently there is no visibility into what type of cargo is moving into Abkhazia. This remains a major weak link in preventing nuclear, arms, drug or other types of smuggling, and has been consistently noted as such by the international community. The situation undermines many of the programs we undertake to buttress Georgian and regional efforts to control borders and combat smuggling of all kinds. Although Georgia's lack of authority in Abkhazia has been a source of concern ever since the 1990s, the international community's explicit message to Georgia to avoid potentially provocative confrontations -- and Georgia's willingness to comply -- potentially creates an even wider gap.

GEORGIANS FACE A RISKY SITUATION IN THE BLACK SEA

¶5. (C) Though the Abkhaz de facto authorities claim the existence of territorial waters, neither they nor the Russians have spelled out a precise geographic delimitation. Therefore, the Georgian Coast Guard and Georgian citizens cannot know whether or not they entering what is being claimed as Abkhaz waters. Georgians sailing close to the administrative boundary are therefore subject to the whim of the Russians and Abkhaz at any given time, which could lead to confrontational situations.

¶6. (C) On November 10, five fishermen, including residents of both Abkhazia and undisputed Georgian territory, were detained by Russian forces in the water off Anaklia, a town located in undisputed Georgian territory just south of the administrative boundary line. Russian forces claimed that the fishermen were detained for illegal fishing in Abkhaz "territorial" waters, and that the Russian border guards acted in accordance with Russian-Abkhaz agreements when detaining the fishermen. The residents of undisputed Georgian territory received a large fine, imposing a

significant economic impact on the livelihoods of the fishermen. The Abkhaz de facto authorities reacted quickly to resolve the incident; they acknowledged the incident during the November 11 Geneva talks, promised to release the detainees promptly, and then did so. Nevertheless, other efforts to enforce so-called Abkhaz waters may not end so peacefully.

BLACK SEA BUILD UP?

¶7. (SBU) In addition, press reports indicate that Russia intends to increase its military naval presence in Abkhazia. One report, for example, quoted a Russian Border Guard official as saying that ten patrol boats, including Sobol and Mangust types, would be based in Ochamchire to deploy along the coast of Abkhazia by mid-November. Ochamchire will also reportedly be the site of a new Russian naval base. The Russian Coast Guard's Novorossiysk, described as an "artillery ship," has reportedly been deployed in Abkhazia since September. These deployments would seem to represent further violations of Point 5 of the August 12, 2008 cease-fire agreement, which calls for Russian forces to withdraw to positions held before the war. Russian interest in purchasing a Mistral amphibious assault ship from France only adds to concerns about a military build up in the Black Sea (see septel).

BASS